



WORDS THAT HURT WORDS THAT HEAL

Divrei Hokhmah

Introduction

The 2014 Women's League Convention featured a panel discussion on bullying, its prevalence and its perniciousness. When we think of bullying, we usually think about the stories of bullying in and around schools, but in fact bullies and bullying transcend age, gender, ethnicity, class, and context. It occurs everywhere -- in the schoolyard, over the internet, and even in the family dining room, or synagogue parking lot. The effects of bullying are traumatic, and often scarring. All professionals agree that the effects of words are often as damaging and enduring – if not more so – than physical assault.

As we begin this new year of meetings, events and socializing let us be conscious of how our words can invite or dismiss, welcome or rebuff, hurt or heal. Just as every word we write is now suspended somewhere in cyberspace, an unkind or insensitive word, if even uttered unintentionally, often remains forever imprinted in someone's memory.

Mavet ve-chayyim be-yad-lashon

Death and life are in the power of the tongue (ie language)

Proverbs 21



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Our Words * Yom Kippur

Introduction

The two congregational readings that are central to the Yom Kippur liturgy are the Ashamnu and Al Chet confessional prayers. They are followed immediately by prayers in which the congregation, and each individual, seeks forgiveness. The “Ashamnu” prayer is a Hebrew acrostic – that is, each line (or sin) is in alphabetical order – *aleph, bet, gimel*, etc. The Rabbinical Assembly *Machzor* provides an English version that starts at “a” and ends with “z”.

We abuse, we betray, we are cruel, we destroy, we embitter, we falsify, we gossip, we hate, we insult, we jeer, we kill, we lie, we mock, we neglect, we oppress, we pervert, we quarrel, we rebel, we steal, we transgress, we are unkind, we are violent, we are wicked, we are extremist, we yearn to do evil, we are zealous for bad causes.

(Lev Shalem, Rabbinical Assembly, 2010, pg. 219)

Discussion Questions

1. How might we characterize the sins included in this prayer? [actions? words? Combination of both?]
2. What does the predominance of sins of speech suggest?
3. Why do you think this prayer is written as an acrostic? [In the congregational confession, our actions span the full extent of language – from aleph to tav, or a to z.]



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The Tongue Can Kill

The talk about a third [person] kills three persons: the person who tells it, the person who accepts it, and the person about whom it is told.... Just as the hand can kill, so can the tongue.

Babylonian Talmud Arachin 15b

Introduction

The Talmud teaches about the seriousness of *lashon hara*, speaking negatively about someone (whether a lie or the truth). Negative talk hurts the person who tells it, the person who listens to it, and the person who is the subject of such talk. According to our sages, using the tongue in spreading gossip is like killing.

Discussion Questions

1. How does a person harm her own self when she talks negatively about someone else? [People wonder if she might also be saying things about them behind their backs. People may trust her less and confide in her less.]
2. What harm is done to the listener? [She now has negative thoughts. She may feel guilty that she could have stopped the gossip, but said nothing to defend the individual.]
3. How is the third person, the one being talked about, harmed? [She loses her self esteem, her reputation, and her friendships.]
4. How is harmful language likened to killing? [Destruction of reputations and relationships and lives is all permanent.]

Janice Knack, PAC member, Jacksonville, Florida



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Divrei Hokhmah

A Prayer for Living Up to the Best in Our Souls

You have blessed me with many gifts, God, but I know it is my task to realize them. May I never underestimate my potential; may I never lose hope. May I find strength to strive for better, the courage to be different, the energy to give all that I have to offer.

Help me, God, to live up to all the goodness that resides within me. Fill me with the humility to learn from others and with the confidence to trust my own instincts.

Thank You, God, for the power to grow. Amen.

Naomi Levy, Talking to God

Discussion Questions

1. What does Rabbi Levy's prayer suggest about the potential for human growth?
2. What factors can encourage growth, and what factors hinder it?
3. Rabbi Levy asks this question in her book: "Are you living up to your promise? What will you say to God when you get to heaven and God asks you, 'Sally, why were you not Sally?'" What does she mean by this?
4. How might this prayer be useful (and used) in creating a healthy social environment in which we treat one another with dignity and respect?

Janet Kirschner, Women's League Books Chair (Mid-Atlantic Region)



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Protecting Those Who Cannot Protect Themselves

Introduction

In the novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, the narrator, Scout Finch, reflects on her father's (Atticus) words when he prohibits her from shooting at mockingbirds, a metaphorical reference to characters in the novel who are not able to protect themselves.

I'd rather you shot at tin cans in the back yard, but I know you'll go after birds. Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Atticus characterize the mockingbirds as worthy of being saved? What might they possibly represent for him? What might they represent within society?
2. What kinds of people might need extra protection? How might we give them that protection?
3. The Finch family paid dearly for their protection of the underdog. Why is it so difficult to “do the right thing”?
4. How do we convince ourselves, as well as others, to do the right thing?

Madeleine Gimbel, PAC member (Southern Region)



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Divrei Hokhmah

Tell Me About Yourself

The goal of Jewish institutions is not self-preservation; it is to engage Jews with Judaism. It's not gaining more members; it's gaining more Jews. It's about people, not programs. It's about deep relationships, not fee-for-service transactions.

Ron Wolfson, Relational Judaism

Introduction

In the introduction to *Relational Judaism: Using the Power of Relationships to Transform the Jewish Community*, Dr. Ron Wolfson stresses that what really matters is that we care about the people we seek to engage. When we genuinely care about people, we will not only welcome them, we will listen to their stories, we will share ours, and we will join together to build a Jewish community that enriches our lives.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the language of welcoming and care improve our social environment?
2. What new strategies and words can demonstrate welcoming and inclusion?
3. In what other ways can we make people feel valued?
4. How does we become good listeners?
5. Why is listening almost more important than speaking?

Ellen Kaner Bresnick, PAC Chair



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Divrei Hokhmah

Sticks and Stones, Reinterpreted

*Yelling at living things does tend to kill the spirit in them.
Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words will break
our hearts...*

*Robert Fulghum,
All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Fulghum say that words will break our hearts? Do you agree? Why?
2. What does Fulghum do to the childhood mantra: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me"?
3. Why do we teach children this expression? Is there a way to reconcile the two statements? In what way can we teach children, and adults, the implications or truths of both statements?

Ellen Kaner Bresnick, PAC Chair



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Lashon Hara

In the silent meditation recited at the conclusion of the Amidah, the language of petition changes to first person **singular** from the first person **plural** that is spoken otherwise throughout the Amidah (i.e. "our God", "remember us", "reign over us", etc.). In this concluding meditation, the petitioner speaks on behalf of herself, alone.

*Elohai, netzor leshoni mera' u-sfatai midabber mirmah
(My God, keep my tongue from evil, my lips from lies.)*

Discussion Question

In the Amidah, regarded as the central (and most important) prayer offered by the community ("we", "us"), the intention of the prayer is to praise God for a variety of blessings such as protecting and guarding the people Israel, God's power in nature, God's compassion, and redemption.

Why, then, within the context of a prayer that blesses God, does the focus shift to individual personal behavior, and this one in particular?

Karen Lewin, PAC member (Mid-Atlantic Region)



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The Bride Is Beautiful

Our Rabbis taught:

How do we speak to a bride? Shammai says: ‘...the bride is as she is...’ Hillel says: ‘Every bride is beautiful.’ Shammai asks: ‘If she was lame or blind, do you say ‘beautiful or graceful bride?’ Does the Torah not command, ‘stay away from falsehood’? (Ex. 23:7) Hillel answers: ‘According to your words, if a person has made a bad purchase in the market, should one praise it to him or deprecate it? Surely one should praise it to him. Therefore the Rabbis teach, “Always should one’s disposition be pleasant with people.”’

Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 16b-17a

Discussion Questions

1. What values are expressed in the competing views of Hillel and Shammai?
2. How do we decide when truth is a non-option?
3. How do we decide when truth is the only option?
4. Since Hillel’s view prevailed, what is the rabbinic view? Agree? Disagree?



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The Command “to Love”

Introductory question:

How many times in the Torah does God command Israel “to love”?

(First, solicit answers.)

Answer: God commands Israel “to love” three times.

1. The text following the Shema, the V’ahavta, (Deuteronomy 6:5) “*You shall love your God with all your heart...*”
2. To love your fellow Israelite (Leviticus 19:18) “*Love your fellow [Israelite] as yourself*”
3. To love the stranger/alien/immigrant (Leviticus 19:34) “*the strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself.*” [The biblical rationale for loving the stranger is “*for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*”]

Discussion Question

How does (or should) this command contribute to contemporary immigration issues?



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Self Inflicting Wounds

The author Sholem Aleichem, a master of interpreting the human condition, wrote the following: *“No tongue speaks as much ill of us as our own.”*

Discussion Question

1. What kind/s of behavior does this statement address?
2. How might we understand this quote, in parallel with that in Proverbs:

“When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, but he who restrains his lips is wise” (10:19)?

3. What does Sholem Aleichem imply about personal responsibility?



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Activity

Once Broken

Materials:

Have as many pieces of paper, of any size, handy as you have participants.

Directions

1. Hand out the papers. When everyone has one, ask them to wrinkle it up.
2. Tell the participants to speak softly to the paper- and say as many negative things as they want, quietly to the paper for about 30 seconds. The leader should participate in this as well.
3. Ask participants to un wrinkle the paper and apologize to the paper for about 30 seconds. The leader should participate in this as well.
4. Now ask participants to get rid of the wrinkles.
5. Brief wrap up by leader: *Words once spoken are not easily erased.*

This activity was presented by Naomi Taffet, LCSW (Seaboard Region), at the Keep It Kind: Stop Bullying panel discussion, Women's League Convention 2014.

Faye Laveson, PAC member